

Humanitarian Aid

Background

Humanitarian aid is the assistance given to people in distress by individuals, organisations or governments with the core purpose of preventing and alleviating human suffering.

The principles of humanitarian intervention are impartiality, neutrality and independence. Impartiality means no discrimination on the basis of nationality, race, religious beliefs, class, gender or political opinions: humanitarian interventions are guided by needs. Neutrality demands that humanitarian agencies do not take sides in either hostilities or ideological controversy. Independence requires that humanitarian agencies retain their autonomy of action. These principles, originally drawn up for war and consolidated in humanitarian law expressed in the Geneva Convention of 1949, underlie response to conflict-related and natural disasters.

The international humanitarian system consists, principally, of four sets of actors: donor governments, including the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO), the United Nations, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (ICRC) and international Non-Governmental organisations (INGOs). Local NGOs and beneficiaries have little voice in the system.

Since the early 1990s, there has been both an increase in the number of disasters and a change in the nature of emergencies leading to a substantial increase in humanitarian assistance. Natural disasters have grown in number largely due to increased climate variability, especially the increase in extremes. Complex emergencies (conflict) have increased, particularly since the end of the Cold War, and are now characterised by high levels of civilian casualty, deliberate destruction of livelihoods and welfare systems, collapse of the rule of law and large numbers of displaced people (15.4 million refugees, 27.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and a further 840,000 people waiting to be given refugee status as of 2011 (UNHCR, 2011)).

Emergencies have changed in nature from predominantly natural disasters, dominated by flood and drought, to complex emergencies and technological disasters. The ‘War on Terror’, following events on 11 September 2001 and the subsequent interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, have created new challenges for the implementation of humanitarian assistance, not least the use of military to guarantee humanitarian space (i.e. to ensure the delivery of emergency aid) if not the military themselves delivering aid.

The increasing frequency and changing face of emergencies has caused humanitarian expenditures to soar. The overall humanitarian expenditure of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) member governments – the major contributors to crises – increased from US\$11.2 billion in 2009 to US\$11.8 billion in 2010. This substantial increase however, was made by just three donors (the United States, Japan and Canada) does not reveal the reductions made

by most other OECD DAC members (Development Initiatives, 2011). While the overall response to humanitarian crises illustrates an upward trend, many governments are under increasing pressure to justify existing levels of aid spending. These figures do not account for charitable donations from individuals or groups, such as churches and they do not capture non-western assistance such as that provided by Islamic entities.

The United Nations as lead agency has an effective division of labour that sees the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) in charge of the policy and planning framework; World Food Programme (WFP) responsible for emergency food delivery and logistics; the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) responsible for shelter; the United Nations Children Fund (Unicef) responsible for nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene; and the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) is responsible for emergency agriculture, which if successful should mark the end of the emergency and the diminution of the role of WFP. Medical interventions are largely left to international NGOs and the Red Cross.

Four Key Challenges to Humanitarian Assistance since the Cold War

Four challenges dominate discussions of humanitarian assistance:

1. Where does global leadership in the planning and implementation of humanitarian assistance lie?

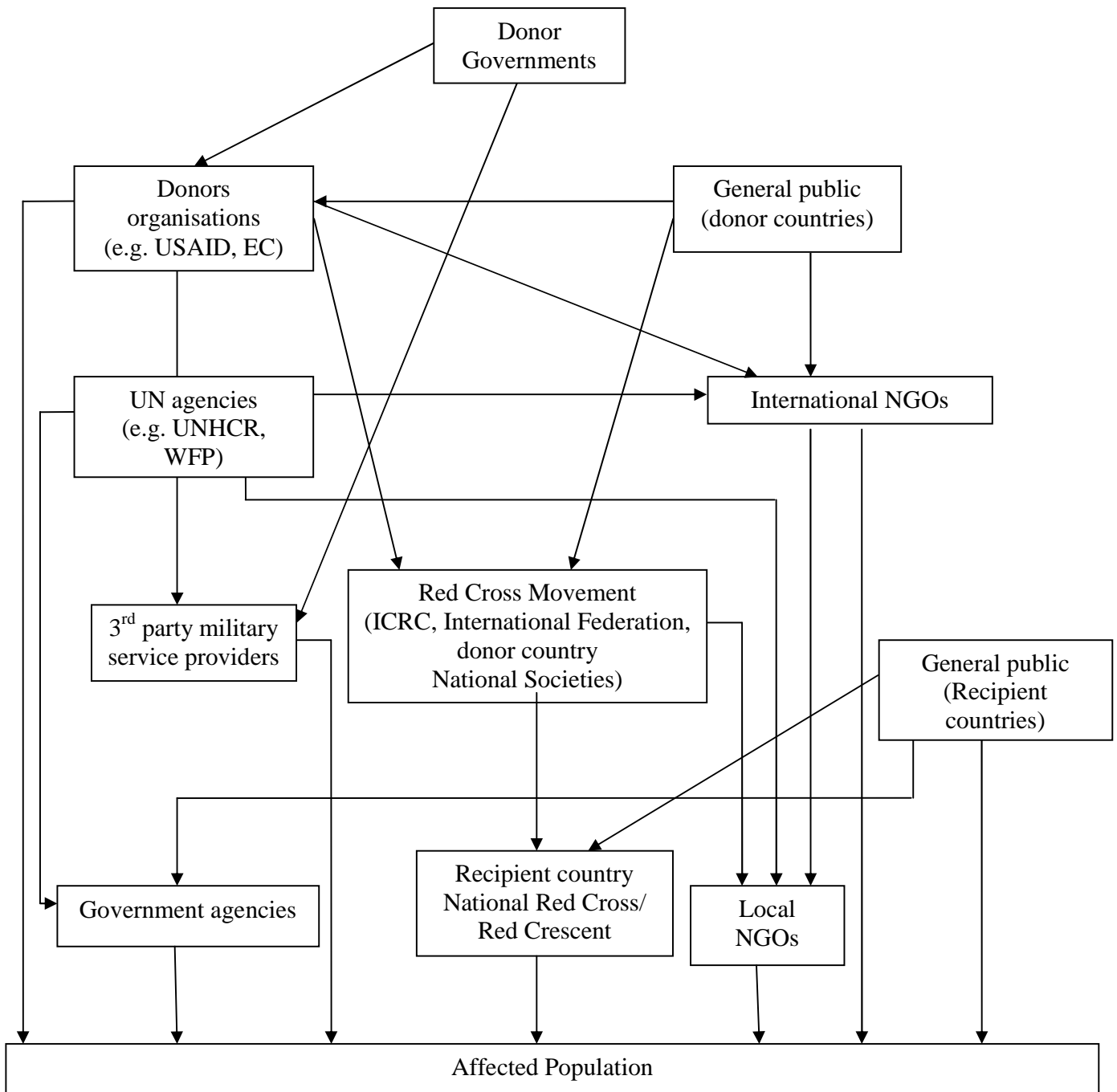
The short answer is with the United Nations system through the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA). In 1991, the United Nations General

Assembly adopted Resolution 46/182 which led to the establishment of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs: OCHA had its origins in this system which is designed for the 'prompt and smooth delivery of relief assistance'. The two critical mechanisms for this coordination are the sharing of a Common Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP) by all humanitarian actors, including those such as ICRC, which are not under the United Nations humanitarian effort, and the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP²). The latter is the critical fundraising effort for humanitarian aid although donor response, particularly in protracted African crises, tends to be poor undermining delivery according to need. The 2011 CAP of global humanitarian contributions indicated that 27 per cent of funds were allocated for food; 10.2 per cent for health; 7.4 per cent for coordination and support services; 4.4 per cent for agriculture; 4.1 per cent for water and sanitation; and 1.3 per cent for education (33 per cent of funds were not specified) (OCHA 2012). In general, however, appeals remain underfunded with 60 per cent response for emergency food, 40 per cent for shelter and less than 20 per cent for water and sanitation.

Although OCHA, on behalf of the United Nations, provides leadership, it is leadership as a coordinating function and not as a 'Command and Control' structure in most emergency situations. To do this requires building shared platforms of information from the different parts of the humanitarian system: evidence of these platforms can be sourced through www.reliefweb. Figure 1 outlines these shared platforms and, by implication, maps the flow of funds. While the United Nations, as the lead global humanitarian actor, is frequently heavily criticized for poor performance, there is no doubt that for global reach it remains the key player. If it did not exist, it would have to be invented. To

improve delivery of humanitarian assistance the United Nations, with lead NGOs has developed a 'Cluster' approach to the delivery of emergency services: evaluations of the 'Clusters' are ongoing.

Figure 1: Resource flows within the international relief system



(Source: Hallam, 1998)

2. How does humanitarian assistance link across the broader issues of development?

The transition from relief to development, also known as the 'gap issue' or 'grey area', has been debated internationally for the last fifteen years, initially in the hope a smooth 'continuum' linking the three phases of relief, rehabilitation and development could be achieved. By the mid 1990s it was widely accepted that no such continuum was feasible and that elements of all three phases could best be implemented simultaneously.

Humanitarian aid remains organised around short-term, largely project-based, funding cycles and the concept that emergencies are temporary interruptions of normal processes. It is true humanitarian aid has been provided for long periods to populations of countries characterised by chronic conflicts³, however, the humanitarian system is essentially ill-equipped to engage with long-term crises, which can continue for decades and whose effects may stretch across an entire country and/or countries within a region. The humanitarian system is arguably already fully stretched.

In striving to close the gap between relief, rehabilitation and development assistance, several donors, like Sweden, have taken the view the distinction between development and humanitarian relief obstructs recovery. More widely, the view is that careful coordination at and amongst all levels is the appropriate framework. One workable

version transpired from the late 1990s to become accepted and is referred to as 'humanitarian aid plus'.

'Humanitarian aid plus' was developed in realisation that basic needs alone were not sufficient to secure a durable beneficial outcome from an emergency. It seeks to support progress to more developmental activities. It was hoped through linking relief to rehabilitation and development the likelihood of further humanitarian need would be reduced: development would prevent conflict and humanitarian need. Humanitarian agencies looked to 'developmental relief' as a route towards this aim. This was obstructed by four obstacles: (1) humanitarian agencies have little influence; (2) there was little commitment to a radical redesign of the development and humanitarian assistance components of organisations; (3) protracted emergencies became even more intractable; and (4) donors sometimes used humanitarian aid to avoid engagement with repressive or undemocratic states (Macrae and Harmer, 2005).

3. How does humanitarian action, especially in complex emergencies, relate to military intervention?

The most significant development in humanitarian action since the Cold War has been the increase in violent conflict. On average 52,000 people are directly killed each year as a result of armed conflicts (this is a conservative estimate including only recorded deaths, the actual total may be much greater), which although high, this is not that different from the 60,000 people that die each year as a result of natural disasters (Geneva Declaration,

2008; Kenny, 2009). However, a further 22,000 people die indirectly each year as a result of these conflicts (Geneva Declaration, 2008).

Over the last two decades, military interventions have become common place within humanitarian operations. This encroachment of 'humanitarian space' led to significant questions of principle and policy and subsequently resulted in the Oslo Guidelines (OCHA, 1994) outlining the use of civilian and military assets in natural and technological disasters. The problem remains, however, that military intervention threatens the neutrality of humanitarian action and the humanitarian workers themselves.

Key principles for military involvement are complementarity, which implies that the military will not be used if civilian assets are available; control of the military in support of humanitarian action must be the responsibility of civil authority; no costs associated with the military can be charged to the affected population; and finally, the military must withdraw at the earliest possible moment.

The use of the military raises wider issues in humanitarian aid, especially whether humanitarian assistance is independent of foreign policy. It is how humanitarian practice unfolds that allows a typology of donors and agencies. Broadly speaking, they are classified as Wilsonian (after Woodrow Wilson) and Dunantist (after Jean Heenri Dunant). The former are dependent on, and cooperative with, government while the latter are more independent of, and oppositional towards, government: the former emphasise delivery, the latter advocacy (Overseas Development Institute, 2003).

4. How can humanitarian performance, and consequent accountability, be measured?

The increasing number of emergencies over the past two decades and ever inflating aid budgets has been coupled with a growth in international awareness of humanitarian emergencies. The media became capable of propelling complex emergencies and human suffering into the public spotlight. Consequently, many questions were raised and aid agencies suffered mounting pressure to improve performance and be accountable for their actions.

In response, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (ICRC) developed the 'Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster relief' in 1991. This document provides guiding principles for non-governmental interventions in humanitarian response. Adhesion to the Code is voluntary, however, it was agreed upon by eight of the world's largest disaster response agencies in 1994 and currently has 381 signatories. Following this, was the publication of the Steering Committee of the 'Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda' (1996), which marked a turning point for the accountability and quality agenda as all humanitarian actors acknowledge they failed in delivering appropriate interventions; this is not dissimilar to the recent multi-agency Tsunami evaluation which comes to a similar conclusion (Vasagar, 2006).

Since 1996, the humanitarian sector has undertaken a range of initiatives aimed at improving accountability and performance⁴:

- ALNAP, the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (1997)⁵.
- HAPI, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International (2003)⁶.
- The Sphere Project (1997) - a Humanitarian Charter and Handbook⁷.
- People in Aid code (1997 and revised in 2003)⁸.

Until recently, there was no consensus about how donors should use their procedures to improve humanitarian response. Donor policy and approaches were often driven by political interest rather than according to need and overall, accountability mechanisms and transparency were weak (Harmer, Cotterrell and Stoddard, 2004).

The Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative (GHDi) which was endorsed by sixteen donor governments and a number of humanitarian agencies⁹ (Stockholm, June 2003), hopes to enhance donor accountability by ensuring that the responses of donors are effective, equitable and consistent with the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence.

Recurrent Themes

Beyond the four key challenges a number of recurrent themes exist throughout humanitarian assistance, including the impact of HIV/AIDS on humanitarian action, delivery of aid to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and the ability and right to protection. These themes highlight the difficulties in delivering appropriate humanitarian response despite good intentions.

HIV/AIDS

In 2003, three million people died of HIV/AIDS and the pandemic is turning into a large scale chronic disaster. Rehabilitating agriculture marks the end of emergency aid and a return to development. The advancing HIV/AIDS epidemic has produced 'New Variant Famine' where lack of labour retards that transition and creates food insecurity (Waal and Tumushabe, 2003).

The spread of HIV/AIDS is also of concern in complex emergencies (situations of armed conflict). The risk of HIV infection is exacerbated by the high incidence of sexual violence and sexual exploitation in conflict situations. Humanitarian interventions must recognize the importance of providing aid appropriate to, and that protects the rights of, people living with HIV/AIDS. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (ISAC) have produced the 'Guidelines for HIV/AIDS Interventions in Emergency Settings' (revised 2003), which aims to integrate HIV/AIDS components into all relevant programming areas.

Internally Displaced Persons

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are people who have been forced from their homes as a result of armed conflict or violence. Unlike refugees, whose movement across national borders provides them with special status in international law with rights specific to their situation, IDPs have no such entitlement (Deng, 1998)¹⁰. Humanitarian assistance is thus limited, in principal, to supportive actions undertaken with the consent of the

country in question. Where governments are unable or unwilling, however, to provide protection to IDPs, humanitarian organisations have sought to assist these groups, grounding their right to provide assistance on existing provisions of international humanitarian law to war victims and on human rights treaties. (Borton, J. et al., 2005)

Identification of IDPs, the different groups of displaced persons and the varying needs of these groups are all further issues in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. A special category of IDPs generating extreme concern to the humanitarian community is demobilised soldiers as their displacement is not only from their homes but also their livelihoods. Humanitarian aid must address all these issues whilst upholding the principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence.

Protection

Since the early 1990s, military forces have become increasingly involved in humanitarian activities, which raises significant issues in respect of the humanitarian principles, as well as policy and operational questions. In parallel, the military protection of civilians and aid workers in complex emergencies and the necessity to obtain unhindered and sustained access to populations in need are vital to ensuring effective humanitarian assistance. The rise of terrorism and the range of counter-terrorism initiatives by Governments have also generated new protection issues.

Humanitarian interventions must address all aspects of protection whilst maintaining accordance with the principles of international humanitarian law and human rights law.

This necessitates strong coordination on a range of issues including, the proliferation of small arms and landmines, reintegration of combatants, security, sexual exploitation of women and children in conflict and the restorative justice issues of impunity and property rights.

Conclusion

Despite progress, there are still well known problematic areas in the delivery of humanitarian assistance especially over coordination of interventions and connectedness to development activities once the emergency period has passed. There remains a lack of attention to preparedness and pre-disaster planning (currently referred to as disaster risk reduction) in general and there is limited attention to indigenous coping strategies.

Targeting of humanitarian assistance, particularly around issues of gender, remains problematic. It seems that these problems are somewhat intractable because ultimately no one has responsibility for the management of humanitarian assistance and since essentially it is assumed to be “doing good”.

Notes

1. DAC is a forum of major bilateral donors with 23 members including the Commission of the European Communities and the United States.
2. The Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) was officially launched in March 2006 by the United Nations. It is hoped this fund will address problems associated with the CAP but will not detract from voluntary contributions to humanitarian programmes, nor replace the consolidated appeals process or additional funding channels. Rather, it is meant to mitigate the unevenness and delays of the voluntary contribution and provide funding to under-supported operations.
3. Countries such as Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Liberia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Sudan.
4. These initiatives in the humanitarian field were also driven from wider changes in Western politics and public sector management whereby attention shifted to questions of the effectiveness of and accountability for public expenditure. Starting in the 1990's, Western democracies aimed to counter declining trust in government and public administration by applying new management techniques including the introduction of elaborate systems to monitor publicly funded activities, and to ensure quality output.
5. ALNAP's aim is to improve performance in the humanitarian sector and share best practice.
6. HAPI is striving to improve the accountability of members to the beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance. It is a culmination of earlier accountability initiatives,

including the Humanitarian Ombudsman Project, established in 1997 in Kosovo, and the Humanitarian Accountability Project that began in 2000.

7. The Sphere Project outlines a humanitarian charter relating to the basic requirements needed to sustain life and dignity, and a Handbook of Minimum Standards that quantified these basic requirements.
8. The People in Aid code provides humanitarian agencies with a framework for assessing and improving their human resource management.
9. *Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship* were endorsed by Australia, Belgium, Canada, the European Commission, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Luxemburg, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Others involved in creating the initiative included the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD, UN agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, INGOs and a number of academics.
10. The legal position of IDPs in terms of existing human rights and humanitarian law was established in the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement

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